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The Revolution Will for Damn Sure Be Televised

Novelist Tom Grimes foresees an apocalypse that raises ratings and makes money

CITY OF GOD
By Tom Grimes
(W.W. Norton: $23; 320 pp.)

Reviewed by Cynthia Kadohata

The following prediction was famously though erroneously attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. Corporations [will be] enthroned, an era of corruption will follow and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people, until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands, and the republic is destroyed."

In "City of God," Tom Grimes has written a novel about the moment when greed has once and for all destroyed the republic. Even if you believe, as some people I know do, that we have already passed that moment, "City of God" will provoke not despair but your natural and deepest instincts for change, for meaning and for decency.

Grimes has set his story in a nameless metropolis in the not-too-distant future. Five characters dominate the narrative: Ray, a young black man who murders two white policemen after he hears a rap tape exhorting revolution; Darren, a young black friend of Ray's; McKuen, a middle-aged black police detective who is the novel's moral center; Nick, an unprincipled white public defender and all-around yuppie scum, and Julia, a white woman in her 30s who works in the city's hate crimes department and who finds love with McKuen.

After Ray shoots the policemen, the entire country explodes in riots. A couple of characters suggest that the nation's money powers have orchestrated the riots as a way of making mass arrests of "undesirables"; other characters seem to believe that ultimately the rioting has no meaning. In any case, the government is well prepared, and immediately declares curfews and mobilizes troops. Mass detentions take place; Armageddon looms.

Nick tries to escape his hated job and the meaningless life he has crafted for himself by capitalizing on the riots. He calls up Gates Remington, the ultra-rich head of an entertainment empire that specializes in gore, sensationalism and sex, and makes a deal to apprehend the murderer on camera. The arrest will be aired on XXN, apparently the only television network left, since every other station is owned or controlled by XXN.

Nick kidnaps Darren, thinking Darren can lead him to Ray. "When the end is near, who needs due process?" Nick asks Darren. McKuen and Julia give chase, McKuen hoping to help Darren.

Ray and Nick propel the action forward, while McKuen and Julia mostly react to what the other two have wrought. Unfortunately, this makes Ray and Nick more interesting than McKuen and Julia. The goodness and morality of McKuen and Julia are never tested, and the reader never knows how deep their goodness is, nor how deep their despair over the state of the world.

Grimes refers frequently to the super-network XXN. Many chapters begin with references to XXN; characters are often overhearing snippets like "This is XXN . . ." from someone's television, or imagining themselves live on XXN, in full close-up. Still, XXN never takes on a dynamic presence. It is a ubiquitous entity, but the way a sidewalk is ubiquitous, not the way evil or power can be ubiquitous.

In "City of God," the feared apocalypse turns into an entertainment spectacle that raises ratings and makes Remington even richer than he already is. Ray himself realizes he has killed in vain, that his crime is "merely another spectacle in the city's ongoing series of spectacles. . . . [He] isn't a hero, he's lost." This is not a book about revolution: Either revolution is larger than spectacle, or it is not revolution. This is a book about the money powers.

At the end of "City of God," the characters in various ways start to overcome meaninglessness—or they literally die trying. Of course, their real enemy is not meaninglessness but the money powers—people like Gates Remington, and whoever has prepared for mass detentions, whoever is so eager to lock up millions of citizens. That is who holds the power, and that is the enemy. But because none of the main characters confronts this enemy, and because Nick and Ray never confront each other—even to realize that they're both pawns—the novel ends on a static note.

Reviewing has become so dependent on hyperbole that words like *brilliant* and *powerful* and *galvanizing* have lost much of their meaning. Against all this false praise, one hates to criticize as talented a writer as Grimes too sharply. Despite its flaws, "City of God" is a fine novel—and a provocative one—about a moment in history we will all need to confront, perhaps sooner than we think. ■

Cynthia Kadohata's third book, a science fiction novel called "Glass Mountains," will be published by White Wolf in 1996.

LETTERS

HE'S GOT A POINT

Larry Wallberg, in his Aug. 20 review of Aldo Nadi's book, "The Living Sword: A Fencer's Autobiography," failed to realize that maestro Nadi was in fact all that he claimed to be. In his publications, as in his everyday life, the maestro was completely candid, and this, not surprisingly, did not sit well with the majority of individuals he encountered in this country, since they already had been taught from childhood onward to assume a mask of false humility and to avoid being overly frank in their daily contact with others.

The reviewer characterizes Nadi as "a poor man's Don Giovanni," and he says that the master from Livorno "inadvertently" wrote a "hilarious autobiography." Moreover, he calls Nadi "a larger-than-life blowhard" and lumps him in with "overwrought men and women [who] glory and gloat, sob and sigh, getting righteously indignant over trifles while all around them the oh-so-sophisticated universe they inhabit is coming to its end."

First, a genuine comparison between the legendary Spanish nobleman, Don Giovanni or Don Juan, and the Italian fencing master, Aldo Nadi, is obviously impossible; but to designate Nadi "a poor man's Don Giovanni" truly does him an injustice. Nadi was in his youth unquestionably a womanizer, however, he was also the most formidable swordsman of the 20th Century. The record shows that he won approximately 60 Italian and international competitions. At 11 he became Junior Foil and Sabre Champion of Italy, at 14 he placed third in foil and sabre in an international tournament in Barcelona and at 21 he won the Italian Foil Championship without a single de-

Aldo Nadi embarks for Cuba in the 1930s.

feat. At the Antwerp Olympic Games of 1920 he won the silver medal in sabre and three gold medals in the team events in foil, sabre and epee. Then he turned professional. He won the Professional Italian Championships in all three weapons without a single defeat in 1924, 1925 and 1927. Between 1923 and his retirement in 1935 he destroyed virtually every important swordsman in Europe. In fact, Aldo Nadi withdrew from competition because he had exhausted his supply of opponents.

Second, "blowhard" is not an expression that can be applied to an honest man like Nadi. He was blunt and at times tactless, but he did not have an exaggerated sense of his own worth as a fencer. Armand Massard, French Olympic epee champion (1920), called Nadi "certainly one of the greatest fencers of all times." And Rene Haussy, French professional foil champion, added: "If God had desired to create a prototype of the perfect fencer, He would certainly have chosen Aldo Nadi as his model."

And third, Maestro Nadi was in no way indifferent to the events taking place in Europe during the 1920s and '30s. He learned early to distrust extremists on both the ends of the political spectrum and, as an Italian, he developed a particular dislike for fascism.

A measure of Aldo Nadi's commitment to our democracy can be found on the back cover of the dust jacket of his book, "On Fencing" (1943); Nadi wrote: "The naturalized American does not take his citizenship for granted. It is quite impossible for him to forget the feelings experienced during that solemn moment when he gave his oath of allegiance to this great country. In this year 1943, he cannot help realizing that his American citizenship is one of the greatest riches man can covet. Without country in the midst of a war of survival from which 'no matter how long it will take' we shall emerge the victor."

Yes, Aldo Nadi was a womanizer. He made love to many women, and he had a penchant for gambling, but he was also the finest swordsman of his generation, an outstanding teacher, and the author of the most complete technical work on foil fencing yet produced.

WILLIAM M. GAUGLER
DIRECTOR, MILITARY FENCING MASTERS PROGRAM
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY
SUNNYVALE, CALIF.

I would like to thank you for doing a review of our book, "The Living Sword." The problem is Larry Wallberg does not seem to have read the same book I and many other people did.

As to whether Aldo Nadi could write well, his first book was praised by the Los Angeles Mirror. Columnist Maxwell Stiles wrote on April 9, 1949: "Aldo once wrote a book, 'On Fencing,' which is the best written and the most interesting book on sports I have seen come from the pen of an expert. Most of the experts write pretty dull copy. Nadi's book is alive with the fire of his intense devotion to his art."

George Santelli, six-time U.S. Olympic team coach and one of Nadi's contemporaries, wrote the following: "You know, with years gone by I have become a great admirer of yours, not only because I recognize you as the greatest contemporary fencer, but also because of your unbending and uncompromising integrity. You remind me somewhat of Don Quixote, who, although he has been written in a satirical way, will represent for time immemorial the knight who fought and died for causes he thought were right."

LANCE C. LOBO
EDITOR, LAUREATE PRESS
SUNRISE, FLA.

INFORMATION SOUGHT

For a biography of opera singer, recording artist, actor, and union organizer Lawrence Tibbett, I will appreciate hearing from anyone with personal reminiscences, documents, letters or memorabilia.

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Calendar

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HIGHLAND PARK. **Don Newton** signs "The Beginning of the World," Arroyo Books, 125 S. Avenue 57, 2 p.m (213) 259-8850.

INGLEWOOD. **Walter Mosley** and **Carl Franklin** discuss "Devil in a Blue Dress," EsoWon Books, 900 N. La Brea Ave., 4 p.m. (310) 674-6566.

LAGUNA BEACH. **Barbara Neely** signs "Blanche Among the Talented Tenth," Mystery Ink, 332 Forest Ave., 9 a.m. (714) 376-0224.

LOS ANGELES. **Hilary Knight** and **Julie Warner** read "Eloise's 40th Birthday Party," Every Picture Tells A Story, 7525 Beverly Blvd., 6 p.m. (213) 932-6070.

LOS ANGELES. **Marcus Mabry** signs "White Bucks and Black Eye-Peas," Borders Books, 330 S. La Cienega Blvd., 7:30 p.m. (310) 659-4045.

LOS ANGELES. **Richard Meltzer** signs "The Night (Alone)," Vagabond Books, 11706 San Vicente Blvd., 5 p.m. (310) 475-2700.

LOS ANGELES. **Deborah Nourse Lattimore** signs "Arabian Nights," Children's Book World, 10580½ Pico Blvd., 10:30 a.m. (310) 559-BOOK.

SANTA MONICA. **Gustavo Firmat** signs "Next Year in Cuba," Barnes & Noble, 1201 3rd St. Promenade, 8 p.m. (310) 260-9110.

STUDIO CITY. **Burt Ward** signs "Boy Wonder: My Life in Tights," SuperCrown, 12050 Ventura Blvd., 2 p.m. (818) 506-5744.

THOUSAND OAKS. **Walter Satterthwait** signs "Escapade," Mysteries to Die For, 2940 Thousand Oaks Blvd., 1 p.m. (805) 374-0094.

WEST COVINA. **Dale Salwak** discusses "The Wonders of Solitude," Barnes & Noble, 960 E. Garvey Ave., 11 a.m. ((818) 917-6382.

WEST HOLLYWOOD. **Barbara Neely** ("Blanche Among the Talented Tenth") and **Brian Lysaght** ("Eye of the Beholder") sign, Mysterious Bookshop, 8763 Beverly Blvd., 1 p.m. (800) 821-9017.

WESTMINSTER. **Barbara Neely** signs "Blanch Among the Talented Tenth," Coffee, Tea and Mystery, 13232 Springdale St., 11 a.m. (714) 898-CLUE.

WOODLAND HILLS. **Dale Salwak** ("The Wonders of Solitude") and **Michael Levine** ("Lesson at the Halfway Point") sign their books, Bookstar, 21440 Victory Blvd., 3 p.m. (818) 702-9515.

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